

Brook, Pete and Darwell, John (2014) Shit photos decry a messy, inconvenient truth. Prison Photography . (Unpublished)

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Prison Photography

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Shit Photos Decry a Messy, Inconvenient Truth

March 22, 2014 in [Fine Art](#), [Photography: Non-Prison](#) | Tags: [DDSB](#), [DISCARDED DOG SHIT BAGS](#), [John Darwell](#) | by [petebrook](#) | [Leave a comment](#)



I've celebrated [John Darwell](#)'s project [Discarded Dog Shit Bags \(DDSB\)](#) once [before](#). Happy to note that the work is now available as a [photo book](#).

DDSB is just about bonkers enough; it is left-field (in all fields, actually, and steaming) and **DDSB** proves there is a photo project for absolutely everything.

"I began to notice the appearance of dog shit bags," explains Darwell, whose 2011 project chronicles the growing epidemic. "At first I spotted them tucked away in dry stone walls or behind said wall. But then they

began to appear everywhere, hanging on fences and thrown into bushes. Anywhere they could be found they would be.”



While seemingly silly and scatological, the project points to a real issue that many city-dwellers feel is out of control. Americans own [83.3 million pet dogs](#). In Europe, the figure is [60 million](#), including [8.5 million](#) in Britain. Those big stats mean it only takes a small proportion of irresponsible owners to make an unsightly mess.

Darwell’s not showing anything that the vast majority of people haven’t seen before — and it’s the familiarity with the images that calls attention to the problem. In the past, Darwell has documented other environmental issues, including various nuclear sites, like Chernobyl, but when he’s not been working on long-term projects he’s been at home in rural Cumbria, England, walking his dogs.

“The local parks became particularly troublesome but even beauty spots were not immune,” says Darwell. “Why go to the trouble of bagging your pooch’s poop to then simply chuck into a bush or hang on a railing?”







For Darwell, the whole affair has descended into a turdy farce with no behavioral logic.

“I photographed the same dog shit bag twice, a year apart and it still hangs in exactly the same place! There is a move to encourage people to use biodegradable poop bags. So the owner bags the poop then hangs it in the tree, the bag biodegrades and the poop falls to the ground where it was originally. Do you then re-bag the poop? The more you think about it the more insane it becomes.”

Even “dog wardens” in Darwell’s local park haven’t been able to curb the madness.

“They watch dog walkers through binoculars to make sure they bag the poop ... but they don’t watch what then happens to the bag.”

Flinging bags of poo tends to be something dog owners try to do unobserved. For all his poop stalking, Darwell has only once witnessed a dog owner chuck a bag away, and it wasn’t the type of person you’d expect. “It was a little old lady,” says Darwell. “She chucked it in the river! I was gobsmacked.”

On that occasion the log floated out of sight and out of mind, but another time Darwell spotted a bobbing bagged doo-doo and chased it down. It was like that plastic bag scene from *American Beauty* but instead of airborne, Darwell’s polyethylene muse was half-submerged and struggling to keep its turtle head above the surface. “I was amazed it floated,” he says.





UK citizens aren't the only ones walking alongside their four-legged friends straight into a canine-gut-stew-terror. On an Australian beach, Darwell found himself surrounded with yellow dog poo bags. In Germany, the bags are red, but you see fewer of them, as the Germans provide more bins, says Darwell, who has extended his stool survey [internationally](#).

The British are, on available evidence, a resourceful bunch using any plastic sheaths they have at hand — nappy bags, shopping bags, etc. But for Darwell, all of this is just doubling the problem, not containing it. He wonders if leaving it to biodegrade might be a better solution. “Yes, I know there are, or can be, serious health implications, but then the poo would disappear in a matter of days,” he says.

This universality of bagging and discarding hit home when a magazine editor in Seattle asked Darwell to stop by his office to discuss his pictures. The editor was amazed to find out Darwell was from England — he thought he recognized the bags from his local park.

Home or away, *DDSB* has clearly struck a chord with folk. Laughably, often it is a conversation starter for Darwell.

“It’s amazing how many people now say, ‘John, I saw a dog shit bag yesterday and immediately thought of you.’”

Darwell has pinched this particular series off but his fecal fascination has not entirely run its course. He may follow through with a different angle.

“I notice a lot of people walking along with the tell-tale bag hanging from their hands vainly looking for a bin to dispose of the offending item,” says Darwell. “I’ve toyed with the idea of developing a new body of work of portraits of people carrying bags.”

The book DDSBs is now available through [mynewtpress](#) in signed and numbered limited editions.

John Darwell was part of the group show [Confined](#) (2011) at Bluecoats Gallery in Liverpool, the catalogue for which I wrote the foreword.





All images: [John Darwell](#)